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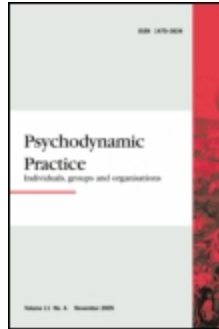
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## Depression Reconsidered in Fairbairn's Object Relations Theory

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**Depression Reconsidered in Fairbairn’s Object Relations Theory**

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**Abstract**

This paper joins in the psychoanalytic discussion of depression from the perspective of Fairbairn’s object relations theory, something Fairbairn did not himself undertake. It aligns with Rubens’ view (1994, 1998) that an extension of Fairbairn’s theory beyond Fairbairn’s original theory to understand depression is not only advantageous but also necessary. Through a revisit of the significant divergences between the classical theory and the relational theory, it contextualises the potential of a Fairbairnian framework of depression as distinctive from the classical propositions. This paper complicates psychoanalytic knowledge of the nature of depression in response to the relational turn, concluding that, framed in Fairbairn’s system, depression should be understood as an actively organised psychic manoeuvre to defend against changes to the endopsychic structure, and most importantly, against the disintegration of a particular sense of self sponsored by internal object relationships.

Keywords:  
depression, Fairbairn, object-relations, endopsychic structure, relational theory

## Introduction

Following ‘the relational turn’ (Clarke, et. al., 2008), psychoanalytic work has become increasingly concerned about generating a conceptual space to reconceive psychopathology in the conjuncture between the intrapsychic and the inter-subjective. The paradigm shift can be seen as partly heralded by a renewed interest in Fairbairn’s object-relations formulation of the human mind (Ogden, 2010), which sees the unconscious processes as occurred in response to the *actual* relational experiences in the social reality. Fairbairn’s brazen objection to the systematic categorisation of libidinal aims into developmental stages, as proposed by the drive theory, enabled him to develop his own model of human mind that places the unconscious conflicts in their relational contexts.

We are by nature relationship-seeking, or in Fairbairn’s term “object-seeking” (Fairbairn, 1946). This realisation led him to shift away from the one-person psychology that characterises much of drive theory, towards developing his own rendition of object relations theory that examines the relational history with significant others and ways in which they define and construct the individual’s personality encompassing a sense of identity and relational configurations. Self, or selfhood, in Fairbairn’s relational theory, should be understood as being dynamically constituted and defined by the social relationships one has, remembers, desires, and creates (Rubens, 1994: 153). We seek a sense of relatedness with significant others, through which a sense of “who am I in relation to you” forms and sediments into the core of one’s being and idiosyncratic expressions of selfhood. If “classical theory emphasizes defenses against drive”, as Merton Gill (1995) succinctly concludes, then “relational theory emphasizes defenses against altering patterns of interpersonal relationships” (Gill, 1995; cited in Layton, 2008: 2). The divergence of relational psychoanalysis from classical psychoanalysis clearly marks a sharp contrast on what is at the core of the psychic pain that triggers the need for psychic defence by human subjects. It is in this regard, I believe,

that thinking through Fairbairn's object-relations theory can offer a interpersonal frame of reference for thinking about the mechanism of depression, as distinct from drive theory's centring of the "relief of libidinal tension" (Fairbairn, 1946: 30) proposed by the more orthodox Freudian and Kleinian lineages of thought.

However even though Fairbairn's theory has been recognised as a fundamental force in initiating a paradigm shift "from instinct to self" (Birtles & Scharff, 1994), within psychoanalytic thinking, to date there exists a scarcity of references to his work in understanding the complex psychic mechanism of depression. Many contemporary authors have drawn from object-relations theory in discussing depression (c.f. Goldberg, 1975; Gaylin, 1983; Summers, 1994; Lubbe, 2011). Yet most of these literatures have not given Fairbairn much consideration on depression. Lubbe (2011), for example, in *Object Relations in Depression: A Return to Theory*, devoted only a few pages to discussing Fairbairn, whilst the classical theories enjoy still more theoretical engagement. Summers' (1994) work, *Object Relations Theories and Psychopathology: A Comprehensive Text*, engages with Fairbairn's theory more: he made Fairbairn's theory his first chapter and succinctly summarised Fairbairn's conception of psychopathology. However, to its great disadvantage Summers adopted Fairbairn's own unclear, if not unhelpful, theoretical distinction between schizoid pathology and depressive pathology, reflected in an imbalanced discussion of the two in his chapter.

The minimal amount of engagement with Fairbairn on the subject of depression in the existing psychoanalytic literature can be seen as a direct result of Fairbairn's gradual loss of interest in the psychological condition, which led to a subsequent lack of a distinctive theoretical framework of depression. Despite his many original theoretical formulations, such as "object-relatedness" (1946) and "endopsychic structure" (1944), Fairbairn devoted little space to depression; his mentions of depression/depressive personality in his 1940 and 1941

papers were all he had to say about it (Rubens, 1998). It is unclear why Fairbairn lost interest in depression. His vague and at times confusing differentiation between schizoid pathology and depressive pathology adds much to the difficulties, if not reluctance, for later scholars to consider his views in making sense of depression.

On the subject of depression, Fairbairn initially took his theoretical departure from Melanie Klein, and inherited Klein's ideas of "positions" (paranoid-schizoid, depressive) and internalized objects (Rubens, 1994: 151). This influence from classical Kleinian thinking gradually became faint as he became increasingly aware of the irreconcilable divergences between them. Even though Fairbairn did not devote himself to developing a distinct theory of depression I believe that his original theoretical formulations have the potential to develop a unique line of thought on depression, as his theory has proved to be important and crucial in contemporary psychoanalytic thinking on psychic process and defence. It is in this sense that I agree with Ogden (2010) and Clarke (2018) that Fairbairn's theory would always remain an un-finished project; but paradoxically, it is in what he left out unsaid and its theoretical ambiguity that generates the capacious potential for multiple interpretations and later extensions on his original thinking. Rubens (1994, 1998), the first scholar to extend Fairbairn's theory in rethinking depression, puts forward a Fairbairnian framework of depression that Fairbairn himself never took forward. In this paper I will largely incorporate the theoretical input contributed by Rubens (1994, 1998).

Moreover, I seek to contextualise the potential of a Fairbairnian framework of depression through a revisit of some significant divergences between classical theory and relational theory on their propositions on the nature of the self and roots of unconscious conflicts in relation to psychic defence. I agree with Ogden (1989), who points out that it is not only impossible to appreciate Klein's work without having understood Freud's work, but it is also impossible to understand Freud without having read Klein's work because Klein's theory

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3 expands and realizes some of the potentials that were latent in Freudian theory. I feel it is  
4  
5 necessary to say that the same could be said of Fairbairn; that it is impossible to understand the  
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7 full implications of what he has achieved, the potential for understanding human psychology  
8  
9 his theory brings, without contextualising his theory against what Freudian-Kleinian instinct  
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11 theory has established. Finally, I will bring a closure by remarking on the clinical potentialities  
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13 reconceptualising depression from Fairbairnian lens could bring in response to the relational  
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15 turn.  
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### 21 **From Freud, Klein to Fairbairn: A Paradigm Shift Towards The Social Reality**

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23 Joseph Schwartz (1999) in his critically acclaimed text *Cassandra's Daughter: A*  
24  
25 *History of Psychoanalysis* presents us with a comprehensive study of the development of  
26  
27 psychoanalysis as a divergent discipline and a simple message - in psychoanalysis, the  
28  
29 development of a theory needs to be appreciated alongside an understanding of its time, of its  
30  
31 un-stemmable unconscious origin deeply rooted in the individual theorist's personal, cultural  
32  
33 and political contexts. Fairbairn, who had not experienced the tremendous ethnic violence that  
34  
35 propelled Freud and Klein to leave their homes in a haste to the foreign land of Britain, made  
36  
37 him less inclined to see destructiveness as innate (I will return to this later). But what he did  
38  
39 experience in personal and professional spheres was a life-long deprivation of *relatedness*. A  
40  
41 rare theorist to radically challenge Freudian theory beyond what the dominant psychoanalytical  
42  
43 climate of the time could allow, Fairbairn's work was one that not many could relate to. The  
44  
45 lack of appreciation of what he had professionally devoted to was acknowledged by himself  
46  
47 with great disappointment, which was only to be compounded by the recurrent  
48  
49 misinterpretations and dismissal of his work by leading figures in the then psychoanalytic circle  
50  
51 such as Winnicott and Khan (ibid: xvii). For almost half a century Fairbairn remained relatively  
52  
53 unknown (Birtles & Scharff, 1952: xi).  
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Personal relationships provided little solace. His marriage was saturated with constant relational strains with his wife, who disapproved of some of his work, and generally refrained from affective expression to those around her. The experience of relational estrangement was life long, extending from growing up with ‘strongly moralistic’ (Scharff & Scharff, 2005: 180) and highly religious parents, who championed the value of discipline over relational closeness. Not having what one so desperately needed, a relationship that could affirm one’s worth and reciprocate with one’s need for affection, Fairbairn (1944) later theorised, reduced the person “to a state of worthlessness, destitution or beggary. His sense of his own value is threatened; and he feels bad in the sense of *inferior* (pp. 113, italics original).”

It is possible that his own relational history was why his work was concerned more with the schizoid way of coping (Rubens, 1998) - the psychic organization through an internal rupture of splitting into the good and bad objects, which, to Fairbairn, occurs more as a result of the traumatic experience of the relational needs not being sufficiently acknowledged and met and less as driven by the unbearable libidinal tension caused by the physiological gratification not being satisfied when arisen. Fairbairn’s object relation theory puts forward a *relational-structural model*, which reformed psychoanalytic thinking on primal needs of personhood and challenged the long-established Freudian drive-structure model (Greenberg & Mitchell, 1983; Grotstein & Rinsley, 1994). It is fair to say that Fairbairn was the first to systematically conceive the concept of the development of personality based on a *relational-structural model* in which the internal object relationships are constituted and structured based on the relational matrix with external others. Moreover, it has been argued that Fairbairn’s term “object-seeking” is an elusive one. Mitchell (1998), in response to Greenberg’s (1991) argument on the subject, suggests that the term object-seeking does not have any theoretical signification if read literally, as all psychoanalytical theories since Freud depict humans’ needs as seeking an object. The question, Mitchell (1998) thinks, should be “what are they seeking



objects for?” (pp. 116). For Fairbairn, the others are theorised consistently as being sought for the “establishment of satisfactory relationships” (1946: 30-31). In other words, objects are sought in order to meet the need to establish and maintain a sense of relatedness with others who need to be engaged in a personally meaningful way (Mitchell, 1998: 66-80). In the relational context, we cannot derive a sense of relatedness without it being mutually enacted with the other. Therefore, in Fairbairn’s formulation, object-need is in itself a recognition and expression of our human inter-dependence. The social dimension of the self and the need for relationships with real external objects was seen as the most crucial need in the development of the self in psychoanalytic thinking for the first time. The critical re-orientation is one from one-person psychology to two (or more) person psychology, redefining the basic human nature and its ultimate motivations<sup>1</sup>. It is, hence, quite clear that Fairbairn’s development of the self differs fundamentally to that of classical theory. Although Fairbairn kept the term “ego” in his writing, his meaning of the term should be seen as referring to the *entirety of the psychic self* that is inseparable from its desires, needs and on-going experiencing in the internal and external reality.

For Fairbairn, we are involved in relationships as soon as we are born, and the content of the internal objects are based on the real experience with the real external objects, albeit often fragmented in reconfiguration. Furthermore, our psychological experience with our primary objects, commonly the mother, can be divided into either satisfactory or unsatisfactory emotional terrains. The satisfactory experience comes from the sense of feeling loved, cared about and needs nurtured, contributing to the creation of the “ideal object”<sup>2</sup>. An ideal object is

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<sup>1</sup> There are debates around whether Fairbairn’s work should be seen as a re-orientation of Freud’s drive theory, as his notion of the relation-seeking individual can also be interpreted as intrinsically an impulsive being but with different motivational aims. However, the debate is beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> As Skolnick (2014) argues, albeit confusingly termed, Fairbairn’s usage of the “ideal object” bears no resemblance to the term “idealized object” that often carries a pathological

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3 treated as an accepted object and thereafter assimilated<sup>3</sup> by the child into the central ego - the  
4  
5 primary, dynamic agency of the “I” that instigates and constructs the sub-systems within the  
6  
7 psyche based on its own subjective experience with the important others (Hoeft, 2009: 75). If  
8  
9 the positive interactions are abundantly received in the child’s relationships with her caregivers,  
10  
11 the positive relational memories of love, trust, empathetic attunement associated with the ideal  
12  
13 objects can develop into a constant source from which the central ego retrieves for self-soothing  
14  
15 and self-reassurance. The progressive outcome is a powerful and stable central ego more  
16  
17 capable of managing the interpersonal circumstances that grow in their demands and  
18  
19 complexity as the child develops (Celani, 2007: 124).  
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## 26 **Fairbairn and the Psychopathology of the Self**

27  
28 With regard to psychopathology, Fairbairn’s disagreement with the Freudian-  
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30 Abrahamian line of thought relates to the latter’s view that psychopathology is primarily based  
31  
32 on the maturation of the bodily zones and the satisfaction of its corresponding impulses. Instead,  
33  
34 Fairbairn sees emotional maturation of the self as requiring essentially the quality and the  
35  
36 complexities of the relationships with the objects and believes that it is the parent’s adequate  
37  
38 responsiveness to the child’s relational needs that predispose her to later mental stability. Like  
39  
40 Klein, Fairbairn began his theory of endopsychic structure (1944) with a focus on the  
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42 mothering, and the limitation of which, rendering it capable of both satisfying and frustrating  
43  
44 the baby. What essentially satisfies the baby, to Fairbairn, lies more in the mother’s  
45  
46 responsiveness towards the baby’s emotional needs of being held and not just the biological  
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48 needs of being fed, whilst the lack of it frustrates. The intolerable tension created by maternal  
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55 meaning in psychoanalytic thinking. Fairbairn’s ideal object however is believed to be, by  
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57 meaning, closer to Winnicott’s “good-enough object” exempt from repression. (pp. 251).

58 <sup>3</sup> On the debates as to whether Fairbairnian good object is internalized or not, I adopt Rubens  
59  
60 (1994) argument that good objects can be internalized but are never repressed nor structured  
into endopsychic structures as are the unsatisfactory bad objects.

responsiveness and non-responsiveness fuels ambivalence with which the infant copes through the primal defence of splitting and repression. The purpose of this is two-fold. First of all, the infant seeks to control the frustrating object (non-responsiveness) through internalizing it, taking upon the badness from the object and store it inside of one's own body. Secondly, the infant seeks to preserve the tie with the external object, either good or bad, so as to avoid separation anxiety from which the self continues to depend. The psychic functioning of splitting and internalisation, albeit defensive by nature, is what Fairbairn sees as the root to a range of psychopathologies.

As mentioned previously, the Fairbairnian baby is essentially one that is wired for relatedness with objects. The development of self takes root in the relational history, which gives rise to a sense of self in relation to others. If unsatisfactory relational experience, such as through the deprivation of the experience of relatedness, is frequently experienced in the social reality, then the unconscious process of splitting and internalisation would be much relied upon in order to mould oneself to interpersonal demands. In negotiating a sense of relatedness, the external objects need to be kept as good so they can be experienced as relationally available. Whilst, their badness, "too disruptive and threatening to the on-going relationship with the object to remain in awareness" (Celani, 2007: 123)", needs to be internalised into the body of the child so he can exert control over it.

Fairbairn terms this mechanism "moral defence" (1943: 65) famously saying,

It is better to be a sinner in a world ruled by God than to live in a world ruled by the Devil. A sinner in a world ruled by God may be bad; but there is always a certain sense of security to be derived from the fact that the world around is good (1943: 66-67)

Moral defence depicts how a child seeks to preserve the external harmony with others, albeit illusory, at the cost of his internal integrity (Greenberg & Mitchell, 1983: 171).

Moreover, the unsatisfactory object can be split into "exciting" and "rejecting" part-objects (the essential part of the object that is recognized as a whole on its own), which are

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2  
3 fundamentally bad objects in Fairbairn's view. Exciting objects and rejecting objects each  
4 represent the *intolerable* elements of the over-exciting and over-rejecting aspects of the original  
5 object. The exciting object is the aspect of the object that is felt as teasing, promising, and  
6 alluring, however it over-excites the child without being able to fulfil the needs it powerfully  
7 aroused. The rejecting object, on the other hand, is the aspect of the object that relates to the  
8 child in a depriving, abusive, or neglectful manner (Celani, 2007: 123). Both objects are  
9 intolerably frustrating to the child, so they are repressed<sup>4</sup>.

10  
11 I particularly appreciate Fairbairn's pioneering contribution in introducing the concept  
12 of ego-splitting into psychoanalytic thinking (Padel, 1991: 593). This distinguished him from  
13 Klein on the matter of repression as Fairbairn believes that repression of the bad objects brings  
14 about repression of the aspects of the self that correspond to, and at the core of its pathological  
15 nature, allies with the internalized exciting and rejecting bad objects. Fairbairn terms these  
16 subsidiary selves the 'libidinal ego' and 'anti-libidinal ego'. The subsidiary selves are split off  
17 from the central ego and repressed due to its libidinal attachment to the internalized bad objects.

18  
19 The libidinal ego is the part of the self that identifies with and attaches to the exciting  
20 object, imprisoned therefore in the perpetually desperate pursuit of the exciting object for love,  
21 and the reciprocation it was once promised. The libidinal ego craves in dependency a painful  
22 longing for the exciting object, as Gomez (1997) describes, like someone waiting endlessly by  
23 the phone for the lover who had promised to call, but who they know from experience will not  
24 (pp. 62). The anti-libidinal ego is the part of the self that identifies with and is attached to the  
25 rejecting object, which represents the original aggressor, and becomes the repository of all the  
26 hatred and destructiveness accumulated and stored up as a result of the frustration of libidinal  
27 longing (Greenberg & Mitchell, 1983: 166). The anti-libidinal ego, due to identification with

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<sup>4</sup> Repression, in Fairbairn's (1944) view, "originates primarily as a defense against "bad" internalized objects (and not against impulses ...)" (pp. 93)

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the depriving and withdrawing aspects of the rejecting object, berates the intensely needy libidinal ego as pathetic and a wimp, and rejects the seductive exciting object as worthless and undesirable. At the same time the anti-libidinal ego denies brazenly that she has any needs or desires for others, positioning herself as “the enemy to hope, particularly of hope for anything meaningful with other people” (ibid). The powerful hate and aggression within the bond of the rejecting object and anti-libidinal ego set off a further dynamite of repression, attacking the bond of the exciting object and libidinal ego. It is in essence a repression (commanded by the subsidiary configurations) on top of another repression (by the central ego) - a phenomenon Fairbairn (1944) originally termed “internal saboteur” and changed to “secondary repression” (pp. 108).

At its core, what is internalized into the endopsychic structure are not solely “objects”, but a series of dynamic “object-relations” corresponding to the traces of the child’s lived experiences of relational history. If the external others continue to be experienced as unloving and unsatisfying, the need to protect and control the bad objects persists and intensifies, leading to a repetitive circle of splitting and repression that strengthens the endopsychic structure and weakens the central ego.

**Depression Reconsidered in Fairbairn’s Object Relations Theory**

As mentioned early on, Fairbairn initially inherited Klein’s ideas of paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions and of internalized objects in thinking about depression. Over time, however, the Kleinian influence became faint as the divergences between their thinking became irreconcilable. This is mainly due to Klein’s lingering adherence to instinct theory in favour of the libidinal impulses particularly in the terms of the internal phantasy. Comparing the differences between Fairbairn and Klein, Ogden (2010) notes that Fairbairn consistently emphasizes the primacy of the external reality and gives the unconscious phantasy a secondary

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3 role, whereas for Klein it is the opposite<sup>5</sup> (p. 103). Fairbairn did not resonate with Klein's  
4  
5 emphasis on the importance of the depressive position in her thinking. Rather, he gave the  
6  
7 schizoid state much more weight in his theory and argued that many diagnosed depressives  
8  
9 were in fact misdiagnosed schizoids (Fairbairn, 1941: 91). This claim had the significant  
10  
11 consequence of marginalising, and under-theorising, depression in his work.  
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15 Rubens (1998) puts forward a revision of Fairbairn's original view on depression. He  
16  
17 extends Fairbairn's original theory of endopsychic structure and stresses the dynamic  
18  
19 interaction between the internal object relations and the external relational surrounding. Taking  
20  
21 into account the influence of the on-going social reality on the internal object-relations, he  
22  
23 argues that at the heart of depression is a neurotic persistence to maintain and live within the  
24  
25 established endopsychic structure triggered by the possibility of change in the interpersonal  
26  
27 environment. The person with depression, as Rubens (1998) contends, is one who persists to  
28  
29 live in "the stasis in the closed-system of experiencing the world" (p. 222). If nothing has  
30  
31 changed, nothing could have been lost. The pessimistic avoidance of meaning would be in  
32  
33 essence a camouflage for such neurotic resistance against any on-going, meaningful interaction  
34  
35 with those around in the external reality that might interrupt the establishment of the  
36  
37 endopsychic structure.  
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42  
43 The endopsychic structure provides a home not only for the internalised bad objects but  
44  
45 also the repressed aspects of self that have *realistically experienced* and *identified with* their  
46  
47 intolerably exciting and rejecting counterparts of the bad object; all together they constitute a  
48  
49 repressed part of the self and sponsor a substantial part of who one feels one is. Just like a child  
50  
51 who can bear the bad objects being bad, but not separation from them, or worse, losing them,  
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53 the person with depression cannot let go of his existing endopsychic structure that stores traces  
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58 <sup>5</sup> Although this contrast appears irreconcilable, Ogden does not see their differences as  
59 contradictory, but complimentary, in the way that they enable what Bion (1962) refers to as a  
60 "binocular vision" in evaluating an individual's clinical presentation (2010: 103).

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3 and remnants of relational experiences between parts of the self with his objects. That is, as the  
4  
5 need to continually reminisce early object relationships persists, any changes are resisted at full  
6  
7 force, so the ties between the subsidiary selves with the internal objects can be preserved.  
8  
9 Considering Fairbairn's concept of "secondary repression", it would then be overly reductionist  
10  
11 to see depression as merely a case of anger directed at oneself, at the forsaken object inside,  
12  
13 when in fact it is a case of aggression being internalized along with the bad object relationships  
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15 into one's psychic structure, *utilized necessarily* as a fuel towards further repressing the  
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17 otherwise intolerable resurfacing of the bad objects and their corresponding subsidiary selves.  
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24 Forceful avoidance of the external reality brings about taxing consequences on the  
25  
26 psyche. Fairbairn (1944) observed clinically a sense of "futility", which he describes as "a  
27  
28 complete impasse" (pp. 50-51) that "reduces the ego to a state of utter impotence. (ibid)".  
29  
30 Although he saw it as distinct from depression<sup>6</sup>, it has been argued that the sense of futility is  
31  
32 what would be recognised as one of common clinical presentations of depression in the  
33  
34 cotemporary sense (Rubens, 1998). Fairbairn explained the phenomenon of futility from his  
35  
36 perspective of internalization. By internalising the bad objects, an inevitable burden of the  
37  
38 badness is created on the psychic functioning. It generates in the psyche an unsolvable impasse  
39  
40 brought to full force by a sense of inferiority of the self at the mercy of the internalised bad  
41  
42 objects and a sense of illusory superiority derived from the subsidiary selves siding with the  
43  
44 powerful, ruling, bad objects. The clash between the illusory superiority due to identification,  
45  
46 and the ever-present inferiority experienced in the central ego from the burden of the bad  
47  
48 objects, in Fairbairn's view, damages the integrity of the ego. As this transpires, "the ego  
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55 <sup>6</sup> Rubens (1998) argues that, in actual fact, Fairbairn's differentiation between the sense of  
56  
57 futility and depression is a result of his own definitional issues; Fairbairn cannot label it as  
58  
59 depression having assigned depression to a different category. According to Rubens this  
60  
distinction should be revised and the sense of futility should be incorporated into the term  
depression.



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3 becomes quite incapable of expressing itself; and in so far as this is so, its very existence  
4 becomes compromised (Fairbairn, 1944: 50-51).” The sense of futility, encompassing feelings  
5 of helplessness, emptiness, and immobilization, could be seen as resulting from the paralyzing  
6 frustration in which one fails to reconcile one’s unconscious inner reality and the outside world.  
7  
8  
9

10  
11  
12 It is important to note that, Fairbairn (1944) did not approve of Freud and Klein’s  
13 emphasis on aggression and death instinct as the primary agent that contributes to the  
14 depressive or melancholic functioning. Rather, he marks down aggression and gives it a  
15 secondary role, seeing it mainly as a reaction to the frustration caused by the objects, rather  
16 than the other way around. This is critically different to what Klein proposed on the depressive  
17 position, that it is guilt-triggered in the wake of aggressive impulses towards the loved object.  
18 It can therefore be postulated that, guilt, in Fairbairn’s view, does not generate as a result to  
19 one’s own aggression, but it arises from moral defence of seeing oneself as irredeemably bad  
20 to preserve any redeeming qualities in the external objects in keeping the relational bond  
21 (Rubens, 1998). From the operation of moral defense comes the true nature of self-reproach  
22 and self-abasement that so characterizes depression. Devils must be kept and contained within  
23 oneself, so that hope to be ruled by God, in a world of meaning and redemption, do not die.  
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40 Hyperactive self-criticism, as also recognized by Freud, and its related phenomenon  
41 such as low self-esteem or self-depreciation, has been deemed as a common trait underlying  
42 the depressive phenomenon. I believe that Fairbairn’s account of the internalization of the bad  
43 object, or moral defence, as a consequence to inadequate parenting, provides one way of  
44 explaining self-derogatory thinking and behaviours in depression. As noted earlier, Fairbairn  
45 sees the endopsychic structure as a defence against the intolerable anxiety in the face of one’s  
46 relational needs not being met and the helplessness at the hands of un-dependable others. As  
47 Fairbairn wrote (1943), through internalization, the individual “take[s] upon the burden of  
48 badness which appears to reside in his loved objects” (pp. 66); by taking on the badness from  
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3 the objects, the bad objects can be made good again. It provides a false justification for the  
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5 deprivation and the inadequate treatments on the child's side, 'I am treated this way because I  
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7 am bad'. The idealization and excessive investment in the loved-object, as located outside of  
8  
9 the central ego, inevitably leads to the devaluation of the self. If the mind of a melancholic does  
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11 suffer an engulfment in a harassing sense of injustice, as Freud observed, understood in  
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13 Fairbairn's term it is the injustice the ego inflicts upon itself by ways of moral defence. To  
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15 Freud, what the melancholic has lost is the narcissistically loved-object, either symbolically or  
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17 environmentally. However, to Fairbairn, what the melancholic has really lost, or more  
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19 accurately, 'surrendered', are the elements of self that feel lovable in exchange for a hope for  
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21 love from his objects which he knows from experience would never be truly required.  
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26 A Fairbairnian depression essentially portrays a psychological crisis of a clash between  
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28 the internal world and the external reality in the wake of changes; change alerts us to  
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30 possibilities of loss and intensifies the unconscious desires to maintain the endopsychic  
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32 structure as the way it is, whilst the reality of the external world comes into conflict with the  
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34 internal relational constellations, i.e. the original bad/unsatisfying object is lost and can no  
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36 longer sponsor the dynamics of the endopsychic structure. This could perhaps explain why an  
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38 individual could spiral down into deep abyss of depression following a change in a positive  
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40 direction, for example when the bad object in reality becomes lost. The common manifestation  
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42 of the depressive pessimism displayed in its inability to change, in a Fairbairnian system can  
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44 be read as a camouflage for its active, by nature neurotic, expression in the form of psychical  
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46 defense against having to deal with changes and the possibility of loss accompanying changes.  
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48 The symptoms of it should be seen as an unconscious expression of the object relationships  
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50 that have been repressed. Depression, reconsidered in Fairbairn's object relations theory, rather  
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52 than suggesting a lack of psychological resilience in the individual in managing the day-to-day  
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54 reality, is best understood as an *actively organized experience, actively and unconsciously by*  
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3 *the person as a defence mechanism against changes to the internal object relationships, against*  
4 *the disintegration of the sense of self and its subsequent psychic pain.*  
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### 10 **Towards a Fairbairnian Conception of Depression: A Conclusive Commentary**

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12         Distinct from Freud and Klein, Fairbairn recognises that the structuring of the psyche  
13 and the deployment of the defence mechanism is organized around the meaningful process of  
14 defining and expressing the unique sense of selfhood in relation to others. Following Fairbairn,  
15 the very nature of the selfhood no longer equates with a sole functional director that seeks to  
16 negotiate amongst id, ego, and superego in order to eliminate the inner tensions unbearably  
17 aroused by love and hate. It is apparent that both Freud and Klein's theories are rooted in the  
18 proposition of there being a common force of the instincts in the face of internal conflicts  
19 between love and hate, whilst giving little importance to the place of relational experiences  
20 between the self and the others. For this reason, the nature of the object relationship they  
21 construed was much narrower than Fairbairn.  
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35         In this paper I have argued that a Fairbairnian depression originates not from the nature  
36 of libidinal impulses, but from the difficulties experienced in the object relationships. Within  
37 Fairbairn's relational thinking, self is an organizing autonomy that, within his own  
38 psychological capacity, seeks to cope with "a set of social and psychological circumstances"  
39 (Orbach, 2008: 31) that he or she is born into, desperately trying to alchemize chaos into a  
40 reality where a sense of relatedness can be obtained time and again, albeit at the cost of psychic  
41 integrity. This fundamentally challenges the drive theory "that attributes psychopathology to  
42 developmental arrest" (Layton, 2008: 6).  
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54         If we can see the subsidiary selves and the internalized objects as "a cast of characters"  
55 hosted within the endopsychic structure (Clarke, 2018) replaying internally the patient's most  
56 painful relational memories, then we can see the transferential and counter-transferential  
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dynamics as intrinsically expressing the internal relational matrix between subsidiary selves and the internalized objects. We can, perhaps, also begin to appreciate any genuine sign of depression during the psychotherapeutic treatment by a patient, for it would signify that a sense of change must have been detected, but unconsciously, forcefully avoided. It is quite likely, therefore, that when the treatment has begun to work, the possibility of change may trigger “the defence of depression to forestall or deny that change” (Rubens, 1998).

Depression, in a Fairbairnian sense, is not what needs to be addressed, but the parts of the self that are frozen in time living in the era of catastrophe of affective deprivation by an impossible object that is “unique, indispensable, irreplaceable” but at the same time “damaging – unlovable, captivating (of non-sacrificial love), guilty, and devaluating, narcissistic” (Matos, 2002: 63). To understand depression through the framework of Fairbairn’s relational thinking requires an understanding of how the self relates to others through the established patterns of object relationships in the endopsychic structure and how depression ‘serves’ to obstruct the on-going process of self-making through engaging with others and the surrounding world in a meaningful way. The withdrawal into endopsychic structure in Fairbairn’s theory, the ultimate ‘room of one’s own’ essentially allows the individual to reminisce the bond with the internalised objects and also to hold on tight to the parts of self that identify with the bad objects as all together they maintain a significant figment of self-identity in the wake of the clash between the internal and the external realities.

Working from a relational framework sheds some light on the problem of therapeutic neutrality. Invoking Orbach (2008), “relationship is influence and affect, or it is not relationship” (p. 39). As the patient embarks on the therapeutic journey, the therapist joins in and become part of what is being explored, examined and worked on. The therapist, who is experienced not only in the patient’s psychic reality but also in the social reality, is ways being pulled towards re-enacting certain patterns in response to the “cast of characters” (Clarke, 2018) within the

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3 patient's internal object-relations. In a Fairbairnian sense, an "idiosyncratic elaboration of  
4 actual relational experience" (Layton, 2009: 2) would be indispensable in working with  
5 depression, but it would not be sufficient without the practitioner's consistent relational  
6 responsiveness towards the patient who needs to be recognised as fundamentally a relational  
7 being. The therapeutic interaction provides the stage for the patient's unique relational history  
8 to be brought to life. The analytic endeavour of listening is to tune in sensitively to the 'voices'  
9 as expressed from a particular endopsychic position in dominance, through which we can begin  
10 to formulate an understanding from an interpersonal frame of reference that validates the  
11 presence and influence of the external others then and now (with the therapist being part of the  
12 picture!), and most importantly their internal counterparts that continue to reign supreme in the  
13 oppressive, uncaring manner over their loyal subjects of the subsidiary selves eternally caught  
14 in the depressive impasse of being tantalised but rejected by which they so hopelessly love  
15 regardless.

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